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CHRISTIAN REALISM ABOUT PEACE

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FOURTH
PRESBY
TERIAN
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Scripture
Isaiah 11:1-7
John 14:25-27

"Peace I leave with you."
John 14:27a (NRSV)

God save us from a too-easy conscience. God save us from losing the ability to regret and experience remorse. God keep us so alive spiritually and honest morally that fifty years after the fact we cannot avoid dealing with what happened in August of 1945.

If you have participated in the intellectual and spiritual life of American culture this summer, and if you are awake and attuned to questions of broad public morality, you have been thinking a lot recently about Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the meaning of what happened on the day the Second World War ended.

I certainly have. I am of the last generation that will have personal memories. I was six-years-old in July of 1944, on the day my parents called me into the house, into the living room to tell me something. My mother was crying. Dad told me that Jack was dead; U.S. Marine, Private First Class, John Calvin McCormick, Uncle Jack, for whom I am named, killed in action. Saipan. It was a day I have never forgotten and will never forget. I wore his Marine corps emblem on my school jacket; his picture is on my desk still.

And I recall one year later, the day it was over. A Buchanan Uncle had been killed in France; one of his sons, my cousin, was killed in the South Pacific; another son was a POW in Italy; another cousin, Bobby, enlisted in the Marines at seventeen, fought and survived Okinawa and was part of one of the the largest forces ever assembled, 30 divisions, one million men, preparing to invade the Japanese mainland — we now know on November 1st. He was coming home. Mother was crying again. "Why," I asked, seven-years-old, car horns blowing, neighbors out on the sidewalks — talking, laughing — it was over, at last. "Jack," she said, "my brother isn't coming home."

William Faulkner once said that "The past is not only not dead. It is not even past." As we engage in the remembering and the uncertainty about what happened and why it happened, particularly as those who cannot remember because they were not yet born, engage in analysis, struggling with questions of morality, it is helpful to recall the summer of 1945. The United States had a new president, Harry S Truman, and the American people were weary of the war and desperate for its end. In July the President was in Potsdam conferring with Allied leaders about strategies for ending war in the Pacific. The European war had ended in May. During the conference Truman learned that the tests were successful and that America had a powerful and terrible new weapon. And the question over which Americans have struggled for 50 years was whether to use it, how to use it and where to use it.

In its excellent and thoughtful 50th anniversary account *Newsweek* said,

> "The decision to drop the bomb was understandable, even inevitable under the circumstances. In a real sense, there was no decision, no careful weighing of the pros and cons. Like most acts of embattled governments in time of war, this one was driven by the interplay of temperament and personality and the sheer momentum of events." [*Newsweek*, July 24, 1995, p. 22]

We can recover something of the historical momentum of events. We do know that the three previous months had been ghastly, with almost half as many American and Japanese deaths as the prior three years. The closer the fighting came to the Japanese homeland the more fierce and determined and violent it became. General George Marshall, Truman's closest and most trusted military advisor, was appalled at the casualties. Individual Japanese had surrendered here and there but no Japanese unit had surrendered, ever, anywhere. On Iwo Jima and Okinawa the battles continued until there was essentially no one left alive.

Military historians know that Japan was already defeated. There is evidence that Japanese military planners knew it also. The point was how to stop the fighting and killing. Even after Hiroshima, in fact on the very morning of Nagasaki, Japan's Supreme Council for the Direction of the War met in the Prime Minister's bomb shelter and

deadlocked over what to do next, three powerful commanders, two generals and an admiral, arguing fervently against surrender. General Anami, the war minister, called for one last great battle on Japanese soil — as demanded by national honor. "Would it not be wondrous for this whole nation to be destroyed like a living flower?" he asked. [*TRUMAN*, David McCullough, p. 459]

And so an invasion was planned. Truman asked Marshall how costly it would be. Marshall may have been mistaken but he told Truman there would be a minimum of a quarter of a million American casualties. People still doubt the accuracy of that and always will, but that was what the President was told.

As the intensity of the fighting increased so did Japan's preparation for the invasion. So did the level of violence and atrocities — we were at the time firebombing Tokyo and other Japanese cities: hundreds of thousands of Japanese people were being killed daily. Truman's biographer, David McCullough, asks a key question:

> "How could a President, or the others charged with responsibility for the decision, answer to the American people if when the war was over, after the bloodbath of the invasion of Japan, it became known that a weapon sufficient to end the war had been available by mid-summer and was not used?" [p.439]

On August 6 an atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima. Eighty thousand people were killed instantly. Another 50,000 to 60,000 died in the next several months.

On August 9 a second atomic bomb was dropped on Nagasaki. Seventy thousand people died, including a sizeable percentage of the Japanese Christian community.

On August 14 Japan surrendered. The war was over. Two things happened immediately in this country. First, overwhelming relief and joy. Because of my own childhood memories, I was deeply touched by the first paragraph of the *Newsweek* article which quoted Paul Fussell, a 21-year-old second lieutenant, leading a rifle platoon, training for the invasion of Japan. He remembered

> "for all the fake manliness of our facades, we cried with relief and joy. We were going to live, we were going to grow up into adulthood after all."

And simultaneously, thoughtful Americans began to experience uncertainty, regret and remorse about what we had done. Immediately, the more responsible American newspapers began to speculate on the meaning of what happened, its morality, its implications for the future. James Reston of the *New York Times* remembers that "thoughtful people were not sleeping well during those August nights in 1945." [see McCullough, p.456]

Scientists, historians, and theologians began doing what they are supposed to do, analyzing, re-examining, critiquing the important decisions that are made, and the process continues. Today, my personal conclusion, at the end of this summer, 50 years after the fact, is that it is possible to experience both gratitude and remorse, and in fact it is appropriate ... Of course people felt relief, joy, exultation, and still do. The war was over, the killing stopped, loved ones were coming home. But also uncertainity, endless soul-searching, remorse are appropriate, responsible and faithful. I have experienced them all.

The war ended. There are Japanese men and women my age, physicians, teachers, business people, parents, now enjoying the blessings of grandparenting who are alive today because it ended as it did. There are many American men in their seventies who are enjoying being in their seventies because the war ended in August of 1945 and not the summer of 1946 as the planners thought it would. The killing stopped. Thanks be to God.

But several hundred thousand Japanese died in those two incidents, the vast majority of them non-combatants, children, the elderly, women. God keep us from moral callousness that does not regret and weep about that.

The past isn't dead. It isn't even past, the novelist observed. What transpired 50 years ago does and should prompt the on-going conversation about the relationship of faith to questions of war and violence. How does a faithful Christian relate to the reality of modern warfare with its incredible violence? The Christian thinker who

struggled with these issues most thoughtfully and strenuously at the time was the distinguished theologian Reinhold Neibuhr. His experience and ideas are still relevant, I think.

After the appalling slaughter in the trenches and fields of World War I, its blurred issues and troublesome conclusion, most of the intellectual community was isolationist in this country. The religious intellectual community was almost overwhelmingly pacifist as well as isolationist. The senseless attacks and consequent deaths of thousands upon thousands of German, French, British and American troops led people all over the world to resolve that never again would anything like that happen. And the best way to avoid it was to embrace and promote pacifism, based on political isolationism and also the non-violent ethic of Jesus.

Neibuhr was among the first to see and realize the implication of the rise of Fascism in Germany and Italy and also the totalitarian form of Communism produced by Lenin and Stalin. "Tyranny continues to grow if it is unresisted," he wrote. [*Why the Christian Church is Not Pacifist*, in *The Essential Reinhold Neibuhr*, edited by R. M. Brown, p. 110]

Niebuhr argued with the idealistic utopianism of his colleagues and reminded them that Christianity is not only about the law of love but human violation of the law of love. He taught that God has made us responsible moral beings; that we are responsible for our private and public behavior; that it is our Christian responsibility to be involved and participate in even the ambiguities of a world engaged in war. His thinking is called "Christian Realism." Niebuhr argued that we must be responsible, that there are causes worth fighting and dying for, going to war for, and that we must always be responsible even for our moral compromises — of which there are plenty in life, particularly in war.

He also recovered one of the oldest and most precious Judeo/Christian convictions, namely that God can work redemptively, creatively, within even the most difficult and threatening and violent circumstances.

"Even in the valley of the shadow of death I will fear no evil, for thou art with me," the Psalmist had written. en in the appalling tragedy of crucifixion God's love is at work.

> "If the providence of God does not enter (human affairs) to bring good out of evil, the evil in our good may easily destroy our most ambitious efforts and frustrate our highest hopes." [p.118, op. cit.]

Niebuhr knew and helped Christians remember that at the heart of the Biblical tradition is a vision of peace. Its most eloquent spokesperson was the prophet Isaiah who wrote about a time when

> "The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child will lead them ... They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain. [Isaiah 11:6-9]

Is that merely utopian idealism of the highest order? Is that only naivete? unrealistic?

Woody Allen, back in the days before he publicly demonstrated Niebuhr's ideas of moral ambiguity, quipped that

> "on the day the lion and the calf lie down together, smart money will be on the lion getting back up."

Isaiah the prophet was not naive. He was looking out at an incredibly violent world. If peace is only the absence of war, his people didn't have it, had not experienced it in the past, and weren't about to in the immediate future. Their world was full of greedy, violent neighbors, always — it seemed — threatening to take their land and end their very existence. God's people have had to fight to survive from the beginning.

So what does this vision of peace mean? Is it a pipe dream? A lovely, but ultimately unreachable star? Is it not better to forget the dream and get ready for the next war? For one thing, God's people have never been able to forget it. And instead of lulling them with some kind of naivete, the dream of God's peace has given them courage, and

strength, even when they were suffering, and being defeated and dying. This peace of God has made human beings more human in war, in prison, in concentration camps. The peace of God has made God's people weep at war's tragedy even as they felt compelled to engage in it.

"My peace, I give to you," Jesus said, as he prepared himself to die and his friends to deal with a world that would increasingly try to hurt, persecute, jail and martyr them for their faith.

"My peace," God's peace — it is the conviction that we are made for peace, and that peace is a gift which comes to us from God, sometimes within the most unlikely and unpeaceful circumstances, a peace that both passes understanding and also refuses to die even when there seems to be no reasonable hope for peace.

Christian realism about peace realizes that God's peace is not merely the absence of conflict. God's peace has to do most of all with justice, that blessed state in which all people are treated with respect, dignity, fairness, that the absence of violence is not as important as justice and that when justice is established, peace will follow.

Christian realism knows that peace is a gift of God, a product of God's presence and the faith that God will be present, creatively and lovingly, particularly in those circumstances, where life is threatened — precisely in war, but also in critical illness, emotional conflict, estrangement between friends and families. Christian realism also casts every disciple in the role of peacemaker ... one who, in the name of Jesus Christ, knows about conflict, and works ceaselessly to bring together those who are alienated — in our families, communities, nations.

The theologian boldly suggested that God works redemptively in history, that out of even the most horrible human experiences of violence, tragedy and sadness, can come something of that precious vision of peace even out of Hiroshima, Nagasaki.

In January of 1990 a member of Fourth Presbyterian Church who was a top-level civilian official with the United States Air Force told me a story which I have been saving for this occasion when responsible Christians are thinking out what their nation did fifty years ago.

At an Air Force base in Arizona our military stores its decommissioned aircraft and weapons. There the U.S. Government takes the nuclear warheads off cruise missiles, the ground-launched missiles, that can be moved around on truck beds and were regarded as a primary threat to the peace of Europe. One of our arms control and reduction agreements with the former USSR, now Russia, provided for the systematic reduction of these weapons.

And so Air Force personnel remove the warheads and in view of an official inspection team, which includes several Russians, proceeds with powerful metal saws, to cut them up. The pieces are left out in the open so that Russian reconnaissance satellites can take pictures and verify what the ground inspectors are seeing.

The same thing happens over there in Russia. Warheads and missiles are destroyed in front of American witnesses, the pieces are left exposed so that our intelligence apparatus can verify it.

And no, it hasn't ended the threat to us or them, or our grandchildren, or the planet. And yes, on this 50th anniversary it remains a national and international priority to continue the reduction, the cessation of testing and producing nuclear weapons. It isn't very much — but it does sound a little like Isaiah's promise that there will be a day when

> "they shall beat swords into plowshares, and spears into pruning hooks."

Because I am a Christian, because I know about a God who in Jesus Christ does enter human affairs to bring good out of evil, I — we are free to struggle with the great moral questions of our time; free — and called by God — to involve ourselves, to commit ourselves to ideas and causes which are precious. Because we are Christians we are called, as well, to expressions of regret and remorse when innocent people die. And because our Savior is the Prince of Peace, because our God has created the world to live in peace — there is always reason to be hopeful, and watchful for those blessed, sweet moments when God's peace becomes reality in human history. Thanks be to God.